

Family Reactions

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Summary: How does the Bat Family react to the announcement? A follow-up to "A New Year to Remember"

Family Reactions

Disclaimer: Again, I own no characters in this story, all are owned by DC. I make no money off this work, it's just something to feed my screaming sense of "PLEASE TELL ME MORE!"

Author's Note: This follow-up is because someone begged me for it...I hope that I can do the rest of these characters justice :) As with the first story, "A New Year to Remember," Jody Revenson's "Nightwing and Oracle" is presumed to be in the past of my own timeline. (Both of these stories can be found at <http://home.att.net/~lubakmetyk> -- Thanks Luba!!)

Again, my timeline is a divergence from Jody's, she has her own plans for the characters. Several people mentioned in response to my last story that they didn't think Babs and Dick had a relationship when she was 22 and he was 16, but I *am* presuming that it happened ;) And some of Batman's reaction is in opposition to Falstaff's "Shadow of a Dark Knight." The reactions in the following scenes are from the rest of the Bat crew - Dick and Barbara both make appearances, but the focus of the story is the reactions of others to the news of their engagement. It's broken up into three chapters. Feedback is always welcome!! gabi@gies.com

<< >> -- denotes a scene from memory * * -- denotes a thought (there aren't may, but I used them in a couple places)

Family Reactions - Chapter 1 Terri Hayes

"Dad, I've got some news for you..." Barbara's voice was laced with amusement as her eyes searched out Dick's. She was sitting on the

couch with him, the speakerphone on so that they could both hear her father's reaction to the news. "Dick and I are getting married."

Jim Gordon's chuckle reverberated through the speaker, "Congratulations, sweetheart. That's absolutely wonderful news." He couldn't really summon up surprise at the announcement, after he walked into their little "love nest" by accident several months ago, but he was thrilled at his daughter's happiness. "I expect to see you both for dinner tonight, Sarah and I won't take 'no' for an answer."

Laughing, both Dick and Barbara agreed to meet her father and his wife at 7:00, and hung up the phone. Leaning back in her chair, Barbara couldn't help looking a little bit piqued, though humor remained foremost. "He could have at least pretended to be surprised."

Shrugging casually, Dick replied, "Why? It's not like it should have been unexpected, Babs." Soft laughter threaded through his tone, he lightly trailed off, "And after that nice little lecture when he caught us in here that first morning after we got together..."

Boy, that had been an experience. Talk about your protective fathers. Dick had walked Jim to the front door after breakfast that morning, and Jim made a point of stopping to check his weapon's clip as he was leaving. "I don't have to tell you what daughters mean to their fathers, do I, son?" Dick had been quite nervous as he promised to not hurt Barbara. Following that episode, it was understood between the men that if Dick was toying with her emotions, Jim would have choice words for him.

'But I'd never hurt her,' Dick thought to himself as his eyes took in her features, 'It took me too long to finally find her again.'

Barbara simply laughed at the reminder.

As he hung up his office phone, James Gordon shook his head. His beautiful Barbara was getting married. It seemed like only yesterday she'd come to him, all pigtails and glasses, so serious and somber. She was so terribly smart, and so terribly alone all the time. He had worried about her in high school, she always seemed so certain that no one wanted her...

< "What's wrong, honey?" Jim had been watching her all week, and her mood had only gotten worse.

"Nothing, Dad." She paused and admitted softly, "The senior prom is next week. Nobody's asked me yet, and everyone is going except me."

Oh boy... Jim had experienced a lot of things in the years since Barbara had come to live with him, but this one was a little out of his league.

Barbara toyed with her potatoes, pushing her glasses up her nose with

an absentminded motion. "It's sort of stupid, but I don't really want to go alone."

Jim considered his response carefully, "What about that young man, ... what was his name, Brian? I thought you were seeing each other last weekend."

Barbara nodded, "Yeah... we were, I thought. Turned out, he wanted my help on his math homework, not my company for a movie." She looked dejected.

"What about... Andy? Just up the street?"

Barbara looked at him with the disgusted expression that only a teenager can pull off. A look that eloquently said, 'I'd rather be dead.' "Dad, he's a complete jerk! He acts like God's gift to women."

Jim hmm'd quietly. "I see. And Christopher Miller?"

"He's got no brains, he's just a dumb jock."

"What about Billy Teasedale," he asked.

Barbara rolled her eyes expressively, "Oh, yeah. He can't talk without yelling, and all that interests him is his college applications. Which, yeah, are thrilling but... he doesn't care if anyone else has anything to say."

Jim quirked a brow, wondering if she would find something wrong with every boy in her school. It wouldn't be the first time, she rarely dated anyone. It worried him. "What about John Humphries?"

Barbara grimaced again, "He's seeing Linda. Look, Dad... it's okay, honest. I just won't go, that's all. No one will miss me anyway."

Jim scowled at that, "Now you're just wallowing, young lady. I'm certainly not convinced that your friends won't miss you at that dance. Are you sure there isn't one person out there who wouldn't like to go with you, and isn't perhaps too shy to ask? Even if it's just as a friend."

Barbara shrugged, but he could see the wheels in her mind turning. "I suppose... that I could ask Sean Riley. He's not TOO much of a creep, just quiet."

Jim left her to ponder that, and was thankful on Sunday when she asked him to take her shopping for a dress. She was going to the prom.

"But just as friends, that's all," she hastened to be certain she informed him. Jim was just glad she was going.>>

... That hadn't been the only time she vetoed every suggestion of a date with someone they knew. Jim wondered through her school years whether anyone would even meet her exacting standards. In part, he knew, it hadn't been just her standards. His daughter was a genius with a photographic memory. A lot of the boys were intimidated by her. And those that weren't intimidated by her brains and beauty all

in one package... well, let's just say they didn't get much further than their buddies.

With a faint smile, he recalled the three or four that had been so intimidated by him, they hadn't called back. He did feel a little guilty about that, but as far as he was concerned, anyone who couldn't stand up for himself against Jim Gordon's vague, fatherly threats wasn't worthy of Barbara. She needed a real man, someone who would stand up for his beliefs and against Barbara herself, when she got into one of her fiery fits or depressions. Someone like young Dick, Jim acknowledged.

Her last year of college, Barbara was more secretive than usual about her personal life. He recalled thinking that it had to be a young man and that she must be serious to be playing her cards so close to the chest with this one. She had this glow about her, and the father in him mourned a little for the loss of his innocent little girl. If Barbara thought he didn't know she was experimenting with sex... well, he wasn't THAT old. But this time was different, what he'd seen in her expression was much deeper than that. And then came the day that she looked so devastated. She never spoke of whoever the young man had been, but whoever that scoundrel was, Jim would have liked to get his hands on him. Barbara hadn't been the same after that, she'd closed her emotions away for a long time. She'd looked so hurt....

< "Barbara? Sweetheart? Would you like to talk about it?"

"No, Dad. I don't want to talk," was the soft response. Jim almost preferred seeing her angry and throwing things. This silent misery was breaking his heart. He leaned against her doorframe, his eyes on his daughter.

"Honey? C'mon, talk to me. You'll feel better if you get it off your chest. Even if I can't help, I'm a good listener."

Barbara's soft sigh was torture to Jim's heart. "Daddy... do you think it's possible for two people to love each other too much?"

Ah, he thought to himself. *So it is that young man.* Jim moved from the doorframe to sit on the side of Barbara's bed, where she sprawled out watching him.

"I don't know, honey. Without knowing the specifics of a situation, it's hard to say. And each situation is different." Jim's voice stopped for a moment, and he finally said, "I think I'd have to say no, I don't think you can love too much, unless the love is dangerous to one of you. Like... loving a man who beats you and ignoring that part, all in the name of love."

Barbara's smile was pained. She knew she couldn't hide from her father that she was in love with someone, but she was thankful he hadn't pushed. She responded, "That wasn't an issue, Daddy. You know I wouldn't ever put up with that. But.... circumstances seem to be conspiring against us. His age is a bit of a factor."

Jim's brows creased into a faint frown. Barbara was always so far ahead of her age group, somehow it didn't surprise him that she'd fall for an older man. It worried him, though, because for all her

brains, his daughter was not as emotionally mature as she was mentally. And part of him had to agree that if age was an obvious problem, then she shouldn't be seeing the man. That part of him silently thanked the unknown man for sensing that Barbara wasn't ready... but the other part of him was furious that his daughter was hurt.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I know that it's hard for you to find young men on your intellectual level who are also your age. Perhaps in a couple of years, it won't be an issue anymore." He paused, "I do believe that if it's truly love, age doesn't matter as much as mental state... but I would hate to see you not have enough time to grow into your own person before getting involved with a man who has had the time to do exactly that kind of self-exploration."

Barbara's soft laughter confused him just a little, but she promised quietly, "I'll think about that, Dad. Thanks." She'd leaned up to hug him and kiss his cheek. He couldn't shake the feeling as he left that night that he'd missed something important. One of the things that bothered him most was that he'd never really seen her cry or mourn for the relationship. She just closed herself off from everyone, even him, and her face never held that kind of happiness again.>>

...*RING!!* Jim's attention was brought back to the present by a phone call from the DA. They spoke about the Scorelli case, coming to trial next week, and when he hung up the phone, Jim leaned back in his chair to toy with a pen and look out his office window while his mind replayed scenes from Barbara's youth as a movie camera might. Her pain when she first came to him, her tears of happiness when she finally accepted that she was going to be allowed to stay with him. Her report cards, her prom, high school graduation and then college graduation. He was so proud of her accomplishments, both scholastic and personal, that the precinct teased him for putting her on a pedestal.

Jim's thoughts took a bittersweet turn. He didn't put his daughter on a pedestal, he knew all too well her failings. She had a formidable temper and ever since the shooting, she was prone to deep bouts of depression. She had always been emotionally insecure and although he'd done his best, there was a part of her that he could never touch, a part of her even as a child that wouldn't be convinced that she was worthy of being loved. He was glad to see that at least one person knew how to reach her. He'd known Dick Grayson since the boy's parents were killed, and Bruce Wayne had done a fine job raising Dick. He was aware of the friction between Bruce and his ward, but figured he understood that children sometimes needed to push their parents away. He loved the whole bunch of them like they were family.

Idly, Jim wondered if there would ever come a day when he'd tell them that he'd known their secret for years. Cleaning out Barbara's apartment for the renovations necessary following her shooting, he'd found the secret closet with her uniforms and gadgetry. It had just been confirmation, though. He'd been so worried after he'd figured it out...

<<"Did you read the news this morning, Barbara?"

If Jim Gordon's tone was casual, his daughter's was more so as she

sipped from her coffee cup with that bleary-eyed, tired look.

"News? What news, Dad?"

"Batman and Robin helped capture the Penguin last night." He watched Barbara closely. She was good. Damn good. Her poker face would fool most people.

"Oh?"

Jim deliberately left out Batgirl's contribution, "He was running another one of his scams down off Hayden Street. It actually was pretty run of the mill. He was using a pawn shop as a front for one of his fencing rackets."

Barbara paused, "Well, that doesn't sound to me like you would have needed Batman's help for that."

Jim shrugged, "We didn't. But we did need his help when several of Penguin's customers decided to get ugly and start shooting."

Barbara's expression turned to one of concern, "No one was hit were they?"

Jim shook his head negatively, both in answer to her question and in amazement. Just the right amount of concern and worry, as if she really didn't know what was happening. Truth be told, he wouldn't have realized that Batgirl and Barbara were one and the same if she hadn't given it away last night.

"No, no one was shot. Batgirl's rather timely arrival is probably the only reason, though. Two of the bodyguards of one of Penguin's customers snuck around and flanked three of us. While Batman and Robin took care of the shooters inside the club, she took care of them."

Barbara was visibly relieved, but he knew her better than almost anyone. He caught the slight tilt of her chin that indicated her pride.

"She swung down from somewhere behind me and Driscoll, and by the time I turned around, she was in the middle of a fist fight with the two bodyguards. Don't know who taught that young woman how to fight, but Driscoll and I owe her our lives. We wouldn't have seen them coming."

It had actually been after she flattened both men that Jim's wits kicked in. Her moves were just different enough to keep him from recognizing her in the shadows and from a distance, which was the only way he'd ever really seen Batgirl. But he was her father. He was the one who taught her the first self-defense moves she'd ever learned.

If she had been further than a bare 15 feet away from him and stuck to the shadows like she usually did when they encountered one another, he might never have figured it out. But the fight took place in front of one of the squad cars, in the pool where the headlights fell.

"Well," Barbara responded carefully, "I'm very thankful for her interruption of their plans. I don't know what I'd do without you, Dad."

Jim nodded slowly, "I know, sweetheart. I don't know what might have happened if she hadn't jumped in like that and saved my skin. That's the first time I've really gotten a good look at her, you know."

Barbara's gaze sharpened on his face, but her expression still gave away nothing but concern for him and interest. "Really? I thought you were sort of 'in' with that whole group. What was she like?"

Jim smiled faintly. Oh yes, his daughter was VERY good at dissembling. "She was quite a good fighter. Batman's style shows in her actions, but she's got her own twist on moves."

Barbara simply nodded, and Jim got up from his chair at the breakfast table to kiss her lightly on the forehead. "I'm sure that whoever she is, her parents would be very proud of her. Batman's never said much about her, but it's been evident that he thinks highly of her. I should get to the office, sweetheart. Have a good day."

Jim left the kitchen to go to the Gotham Police Department with a lot on his mind. With what she didn't say, Barbara had confirmed his worst fears. Now, in addition to worrying about young Robin and Batman, he would have to hope that he didn't come on a crime scene where his own daughter was a victim.>>

... He never let on that he knew. Technically, he would have been forced to arrest them all if he knew their identities. Vigilantism was not an accepted form of law enforcement. But he felt too strongly that their activities were what kept Gotham from sliding too far down the slope into complete anarchy. Perhaps someday when he wasn't the Police Commissioner anymore, he'd tell. Meanwhile, it wasn't hard to pretend that he didn't see things, and it kept everyone's peace of mind intact.

Shaking his head, Jim chuckled softly when he thought about how he'd let himself into Barbara's apartment several months ago and stumbled into their little tryst. How long it was going on before that, he wasn't certain. The look on Dick's face had been priceless as Jim walked in the front door, but he presumed the look on his own was equally flabbergasted and embarrassed. When he'd gone to wash his hands before joining them for breakfast, a move designed to allow all three of them to regain some composure, the puddle of material in Barbara's hamper gave away why Grayson's car wasn't outside. As usual, Jim pretended there was nothing out of the ordinary. Spot Nightwing's costume on the floor of the bathroom? Never!

Jim had taken a couple of days to think about the situation, after seeing how happy the young man made his daughter. He couldn't help but worry how Barbara would react if Nightwing was ever badly injured in the line of his vigilante work. The memory of her retreat into isolation and the contrast to her happiness now was drastic... how much more so would it be a second time? But Dick was a careful man. He had to be. And if he could work with the brooding Dark Knight for so long, he was strong enough to handle Barbara's moods. It was obvious to him that Barbara had given something very precious to Dick

Grayson - her complete trust and love. It made him happy to know she wouldn't be alone anymore. Jim's smile blossomed into a full-face grin as he slid out of his chair to announce with satisfaction to the precinct and his wife that his daughter was getting married!

Family Reactions - Chapter 2 Terri Hayes

After basking a little in the pleasure at being able to tell someone about their great news, Barbara looked up at Dick. Quietly, she said, "We have a couple of other calls to make.... would you rather wait?"

Dick's expression took on a vague tension, but he responded with a negative shake of his head. "Let's do it now."

Barbara put her hand over his, replying softly, "We don't have to, Dick. I know that you and Bruce are still having some difficulties."

Dick shook his head adamantly and smiled for her. "Whatever difficulties Bruce and I have, he'll be happy for us. And Alfred and Tim will want to know, too. It's okay, Babs." He leaned over to kiss her softly.

Barbara returned the kiss, putting all of her love into it. Then she reached over to type the commands that would allow her computer to link up with the ones in the BatCave, waiting several minutes for the BatComputer to notify the inhabitants of the mansion by ringing a special phone line that there was a video call coming into the cave. Bruce's face filled the screen finally, and Barbara smiled.

"Afternoon, Bruce... are Alfred and Tim both with you?"

Bruce Wayne raised his eyebrows, the only indication of his surprise. "Alfred's here, and Tim should be here momentarily. Is everything all right, Barbara?"

Dick leaned slightly forward then from where he'd been out of sight of the monitor. Bruce simply nodded as he spotted his past partner, betraying curiosity. Barbara looked up to Dick, a faint smile telling him that he would have to be the one to announce this one.

Making a small face at her, Dick looked at the screen and said quietly, "We have an announcement for you both. We're getting married." Dick's hand slipped into Barbara's, even as smiles cracked through the normally serious expressions on both of the men in the BatCave.

Alfred looked as ecstatic as a properly dignified butler could get, "Master Dick! Congratulations, sir! And to you, Miss Barbara!"

Bruce, like Jim Gordon, simply wasn't surprised by the announcement. His words echoed Alfred's with feeling, "I couldn't be happier for you both. If you'd like, we'll tell Tim when he gets in."

Barbara nodded, but Dick shook his head negatively. "No, don't tell him. I'll catch him on patrol this evening and tell him myself, if you don't mind." His voice was only a little bit cool, and Bruce noted it.

"Dick... " Bruce paused a moment. "I'll send him over on the West Side this evening, you should be able to find him from there." He smiled some and said quietly, "Congratulations to you both."

Alfred, in the background, couldn't contain his chuckles, "We shall have to give a formal announcement, Master Dick, so do let me know when you wish to hold a party and what I can do to assist."

Dick laughed softly, "All right, Alfred, we will. Thanks... to both of you." His eyes lingered on his mentor's face and then he smiled. "Take care, and we'll talk to you both later."

Barbara closed the window and looked up at her fiance, murmuring, "I'm very proud of you, you know. You mean a lot to both of them." When he leaned over to kiss her heatedly, Barbara lost her train of thought.

Bruce Wayne closed his end of the link to Oracle's machine, and was silent as he looked at the screen. Alfred simply said, "I'll be upstairs, Master Bruce." Then he slipped out in his usual silent way.

Left in the silence of the Cave, Bruce leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers together. He was genuinely happy for them. Though he didn't know how to show it so well, he was truly sorry for the distance that remained between himself and Dick. He was well aware of his failings when it came to Dick. He was also aware of how dismally he'd failed Barbara. She was shot on his watch. He should have been able to stop both it and the torture of Jim Gordon. They were both amazingly strong people. Neither had ever held him accountable. He was the one who was castigating Batman for not doing enough.

Not doing enough. He was forever not doing enough to protect the ones closest to him. He couldn't keep his parents from being shot, he couldn't keep Dick or Barbara from being shot, he couldn't save Jim Gordon from being injured by the Joker, he couldn't save Jason from being killed... and now there was Tim to look out for as well. Bruce was forced to ask himself how all these people had gotten so close to him. It was so easy for people to be taken away, and yet they had all breached his defenses when he really wasn't looking.

Rocking his chair slightly back and forth, Bruce tried to work out his thoughts. Both Barbara and Dick deserved their happiness. Oh, he'd known years before about their intimacy. Dick was 16 at the time, and Bruce debated long and hard before approaching Barbara. Dick had seen too much of the gritty side of life to be considered a child and Barbara had managed to retain the naivete and innocence that prevented her from becoming a hardcase. He thought, even now, that mentally they'd been close in ages but he had brought his formidable logic to bear when arguing that their relationship would go nowhere to the young, idealistic woman. It had been a difficult

confrontation...

< "What's going down?"

Her voice was low, though musical in quality. His eyes raked over her with a mixture of parental disapproval and disappointment. "Nothing here. I told you to meet me so that we could talk."

Barbara was surprised, though the mask of Batgirl hid most of it. Warily, she responded, "Talk? What about?" The slight tension in her betrayed that she knew it wouldn't be a good talk.

"Your... relationship. With Dick."

Barbara closed her eyes, her breath escaping her silently. She had obviously been expecting this for some time. She didn't reply, though.

"Have you nothing to say for yourself?" Batman's voice contained the hard edge that denoted he was controlling himself tightly.

Batgirl's response came in slow, thoughtful words. "What would you like me to say? That I'm a fool? I probably am. That I won't see him anymore? I.... can't." She paused, her next words painful to hear and obviously to say, as well.

"Don't you think that I've already said all the things to myself that you want to say to me? That he's too young for me. That I should know better. How dare I take advantage of a 16 year old..." Her voice broke slightly, but she regained her control quickly.

Batman remained silent, studying her intently as her voice continued.

"God, Bruce... I've even thought myself a pedophile or some kind of sicko at times." She pulled her mask and cowl off to face the wrath of Batman as Barbara, exposing her face to his view. "But I can't stop feeling the way I feel about him. Maybe that sounds insane, coming from me. I'm well aware that he's still in high school and I just graduated from college. It's sick, right?" Her voice became soft.

"I've dated around the college, Bruce. And I've *never* met someone who is ... so close to me. We bounce ideas off one another like two halves of the same brain. We talk about so much... I think we're closer to each other than to anyone else. He tells me so many things, and I tell him too."

Was she pleading, or simply trying to justify? In his anger, Batman couldn't be sure and remained silent. He didn't want to hurt Barbara... she was someone he respected, someone whose input in a situation could be invaluable. He watched expressionlessly as she struggled for words, looking up at him.

"I can't be ashamed of my feelings for him, Bruce. I love him, no matter how crazy that sounds. Maybe it's this job and the intensity that surrounds us while we do it... maybe it's just that we're foils for each other... I don't know. It doesn't excuse my actions." She paused and swallowed hard. "I'll understand if you are going to take

up legal proceedings. It's well within your rights as his guardian."

It was then that Bruce Wayne made his decision. When he'd realized how far their relationship had progressed, he'd been furious. Now, though... Barbara was no older, emotionally, than Dick was. Regardless of their physical ages, their mental and emotional ages were very close. She was obviously having trouble with the situation anyway, he rationalized. So he would correct it.

"You claim to love him. But you're already well aware that he's just a child. He hasn't grown up sheltered in any way, no. But a child he is. The legalities of this situation are untenable, Barbara. You will have to make a choice. If you choose to continue this relationship without giving him the opportunities that you yourself have already explored, how can you be certain there won't come a time that he resents you? He's 16 years old. Do you intend to let him go to college without being able to learn all that it has to teach, both social and scholastic?"

Batman's voice was impassive, though there was an undercurrent of steel to the words. "Just how fair is that to him? Or to you? I will not follow up on the legal issues of this unless I feel that you have disregarded this warning. I want for Dick all the things that he deserves. And I want that for you, as well. Do you think that this relationship will go anywhere at your ages? He can't bring you to parties as his date. You can't take him out to dinner as your date. Your relationship, by necessity, would have to be hidden from everyone. Do you truly believe that it would work that way? One or the other of you would be bound to slip at some point. You're also jeopardizing your working relationship. You can't believe that if it goes sour, which it inevitably does, you'll be able to work together. Think on it."

Leaving it at that, the Dark Knight left Barbara stifling sobs atop the warehouse roof. He hoped he wouldn't have to step into the situation and confront Dick about what was happening. He hoped that Barbara would see reason.>>

... He hadn't threatened Barbara, though initially he'd considered doing so, in his rage. It had been very shortly thereafter that Dick's face had taken on that closed, confused, hurt expression. As if life had kicked him in the teeth and he wasn't sure why. Barbara's eyes gained a haunted kind of pain, and she'd withdrawn from all but absolutely necessary contact with the Dynamic Duo. Bruce had expected it to be hard, but he hadn't expected the depth of the injury that was inflicted on both of them that night.

Through the breakup and for a while following it, the two of them wouldn't even work together. He'd wanted to throttle them both for a while. Each had taken far more risks over those weeks than should have been required and he'd had his hands full keeping an eye on them when they were never in the same area at the same time.... < Two ruffians in an alley beating up on a homeless man must have seemed like a godsend to Dick, Bruce realized. A way to get his aggression out on people who deserved it. Bruce stood silently in the darkness above the scene, making certain his protege had himself in hand.

Robin gunned the engine on his motorcycle, sending the bike flying

into the alleyway. The Boy Wonder launched himself from the seat to tackle the blond hoodlum on the left. The motorcycle went several yards further before tipping on it's side with its engine idling. Caught unawares, the blond took the full force of the hit, tumbling backward with Robin into a pile of trash cans. The dark-haired one looked stunned. "Snake??!"

Climbing back to his feet, Robin growled, "Pick on someone who can fight back this time, creep!"

The dark-haired ruffian abandoned his initial target when Snake didn't immediately climb to his feet, "You bastard! Ya killed Snake!" A knife appeared in his hand, apparently from nowhere. Batman tensed, holding his Batarang to the ready.

Maybe he shouldn't have bothered. Robin's pent-up fury exploded into a blur of fists and feet as he hammered the two troublemakers. He fought completely without regard to the knife, though it earned him several deep nicks in his arms and legs. Robin checked both hoodlums once they were down and then went to help the homeless man totter to his feet.

He couldn't take the old man on his motorcycle; he could only make certain that he would be all right, then leave. Batman watched in silence, letting Dick get a half an hour or so head start to get back to the BatCave. Alfred would patch him up and since he wasn't badly injured, there was no point in lecturing him about this incident. For now.>>

< Robin's enthusiasm for the bust caused him to misjudge the situation, and he'd swung in and landed on the ground just in time for the second group of thugs to arrive. Apparently running late for the meeting, they were already nervous and immediately leveled their weapons on the young vigilante. Surrounded on all sides by men toting machine guns as Robin was, it was up to Batman to incapacitate them and draw their fire.

Scrambling over the rooftop, Batman called, "Robin, heads up!"

Three gas pellets dropped into the midst of the group while Robin fired off his grappling hook and flew skyward on the attached line. The staccato sounds of machine gun fire echoed across the water. The two masked vigilantes raced away from the scene even as police sirens wailed to life several blocks over.

When they'd gotten away from the scene, Batman stopped Robin atop the roof of another warehouse with a hand on the boy's shoulder. In a rough, grating voice, he asked, "What were you thinking??"

Robin shook off his hand, furious. "I had it covered, I didn't need your help."

"Robin, you almost got yourself shot! You know better than that!"

A scowl settled on the young man's features, "You think I always need to be rescued by you? Think again, Batman. I had it under control."

Batman's voice was cold as he said, "You didn't have anything under control. Next time, do as you're taught and at least count the number you're facing. Or do a little research and figure out if two groups is all that's showing."

Robin turned and faced off against Batman, pushing a finger into his chest. "*You* stay the hell out of my way, Batman. I don't need a babysitter, and I *don't* need you to fight my battles for me." He turned away and fired his grappling line off again. "Go find your own damn busts to make."

Batman sighed and let him go. When he'd seen the machine guns, he'd been afraid. It was a new feeling for him, compounded by the guilt he felt at being the cause of his protege's reckless activities.>>

< "Little girl, yer in big trouble.... the big bad Bat ain't here to pull your fat outta the fire, either." The first guy launched himself at Batgirl, intending to tackle her to the ground, but she was too well trained to be taken by such a move.

Kicking her foot out, she caught him right in the jaw. "If you think I need the big bad Bat, you're seriously mistaken. Never underestimate the power of a woman, boys."

Unfortunately, Goons #2 and #3 were a little smarter and worked together. Surrounding her, one on either side, the skinny Goon (#2) tried to punch her and while her attention was engaged there, the heavier goon (#3) threw his coat over her head and grabbed her.

Taunting in a mumbled voice as Batgirl squirmed and tried to fight back, Goon #1 climbed to his feet, "Looks like woman power just got overwhelmed by manpower." He was cradling his jaw painfully.

Batman chose to bide his time for another minute to see if Batgirl would get loose. Her muffled shouts, though, indicated that she was truly caught. The heavy guy, Goon #3, said to Goon #1, "Hey boss... whadda we do with the little Bat chick now that we got her?"

The first man responded, "Keep her from gettin' away, Frankie. We'll use her as a hostage if the Batman shows up and tries to stop us from leavin'. The cops are already on their way here, y'know... we gotta get outta here!"

"Alright, Rob..."

A Batarang whizzed past Rob's head to smack the second goon, whose name hadn't yet been used. Whatever his name was didn't matter, since he simply crumpled to the ground without uttering more than a soft moan of pain.

Frankie's head jerked around to look at the fallen man, "Joey?" Then he looked upward and screamed, "Aw, god, Rob! 's HIM!!" Frankie shoved the jacket-covered Batgirl away from himself and took off running.

Rob started to say something, but it was every man for himself when it came to the Batman. He stammered, "We... we wasn't gonna hurt her, I swear!" He backpedaled several steps, and then turned around to run as well.

Batgirl shoved the jacket off her head, furious. She climbed to her feet as Batman landed beside her. He asked in that stern, cold tone, "Are you all right?"

"I had them where I wanted them, I didn't need your help!"

Again, his tone still calm and authoritative, "It appeared more like they had you where they wanted you. If you're trying to get yourself injured or worse, do it somewhere else. I don't have any desire to explain to your father what you're out here doing in that costume."

Batgirl turned her back to him and cuffed the last ruffian, the one called 'Joey'. "I'll call it in. Get lost."

Batman watched her a moment and sighed, "Batgirl..."

Batgirl whirled to face him, "Don't. Just get the hell out of here, I don't want to see you. I don't need you following me. I don't need you pulling me out of trouble. And I *don't* need you telling me that it was for my own good! I did what you wanted. Now stay away from me." Her voice broke slightly, "Keep him out of trouble."

She launched a grappling rope, "Never mind. YOU call it in." And then she was gone.

Bruce sighed to himself. Keeping up with her and Robin, jumping into these situations was a full time job in and of itself.>>

... He still wished there had been another way. They were both so hurt by the breakup of the relationship, they no longer had a care for their own health. Though a keen observer of human nature and behavior, Bruce was too emotionally scarred to do more than remain the aloof, distant protector. They had to learn for themselves what pain could be inflicted by caring too much. And so he'd done what he could to protect both of them during their reckless attempts to forget each other. His 'son' and the girl who'd won her own place in Bruce's guarded heart.

The intervening years brought maturity to both of them. Rediscovering that illusive something between them, they reclaimed the closeness they shared before the aborted relationship and had slowly built on it in the intervening years. Somehow, it didn't surprise him that they would gravitate back toward one another. The intensity of their feelings and their pain made both exceedingly cautious with giving their hearts, afraid to be hurt. In part, he felt responsible for that.

He watched their friendship blossom again over the years and known their feelings were still there. The relationship growing into deeper love over time made sense to him, considering their past emotions. The boy who came to him so many years ago had never lost the capacity to love, though he learned quickly not to let too many people close. Especially following the breakup with Barbara. When he finally trusted someone enough to let her in, with Koriand'r, he had again

had his fragile trust stomped upon.

Regret passed over Bruce's face. He hadn't been certain that his surrogate son would bounce back from that second injury to his heart, and he occasionally wondered if maybe he was wrong to have split Dick and Barbara up back then. He just didn't want either of them hurt. Not then, and not now. He didn't want Dick, the only son he would likely ever have, to be as alone as Bruce himself was.

Now they were engaged. He **was** happy for them, damn it! Wasn't he? They deserved happiness.... Bruce shook his head, resting his chin on his steepled fingers.

The practicalities. Would Dick continue with his work as Nightwing now? What about children? Bruce fell deeper into his brooding over the situation. Was this **really** the best thing for them both? All kinds of complications could come of their relationship, as they had before. And if they had kids, Dick's attention would constantly be split between the job and his family. That could so easily get him killed. And what would happen to Barbara then? What would happen if Nightwing's identity became known somehow? The nocturnal activities of vigilante fighters for justice certainly drew more than bad press - it drew enemies. And Barbara was already made a target too many times. Images of the night she was paralyzed haunted him...

< Barbara, spread-eagled on the floor of her father's living room.

Naked.

Bleeding from a gut wound that her hands tried desperately to put pressure on to stop the bleeding.

Being posed like a marionette whose string were cut.

Biting her lip in agony.

Tears on her face.

Curled in a fetal position so blood from both stomach and back pooled around her hips.

Lying on her stomach so that the gaping exit wound in her lower back was clearly visible in all its bloody glory.

Her spine shattered by the bullet.>>

... **NO! Never again!** Sternly quelling the horrific pictures, Bruce mentally catalogued the various criminals in Gotham and leaned his head back against the chair to sigh. Had they considered the dangers inherent to this line of work? How could they be thinking about marriage and kids, when both of them had seen the kind of repercussions, both physical and emotional, that could come from their night "jobs." That thought stopped him for a long moment in his pacing. Here he was, asking 'how dare they?' when the real question was 'how dare I?' How dare he get upset that they were pulling together like this? Had he learned nothing from his interference the first time?

Bitterly, he realized he would always stand outside such

relationships like a poverty-stricken child looking in the window of the candy store and wishing for what was inside. Like that bereft child, when Bruce did attempt to partake of the sweetness, he inevitably tried to have too much and ruined the heavenly treat.

All right, then, he would admit it. He was envious of what Dick and Barbara found together, even though he couldn't take the same chance with his own heart. His fears of losing the ones he cared about were too deep-rooted to be ousted now. But the one thing he could do was to make sure that Dick and Barbara were as safe as possible. He could work with Barbara on an extra-good security system, and if they were moving out of her apartment, he could help them set up their household with extra measures of safety protocols.

He had watched them both grow from the very young, immature children they were when they started their vigilante careers to the strong, capable, intelligent leaders they were today. Perhaps their transformation was in part due to his teaching. He just hoped they hadn't forgotten what he taught them. Security **should** be as natural to them as breathing. Without being vain, he'd at least taught them how to stay alive. In return, they taught him how to work as a team when necessary.

Bruce stood from his chair to pace the Batcave in agitation. He had done very poorly as a parent, he acknowledged. Perhaps he was too concerned about the safety issues, but he didn't know any other way to be. Alfred had warned him so many times over the years that if he didn't find a way to stop operating under the superstitious assumption that anyone he cared about was certain to die, Dick would be forced to leave in order to not be stifled. Had that been what he wanted? Bruce considered that for a long while as he walked.

Dick's arrival at the mansion was hard on Bruce emotionally. Taking in a small boy whose parents just died had been an impulse move, a very rare thing for him. What on Earth would he do with a child?? It was just that he saw so much of himself in Dick. And maybe... just maybe... he could help the boy deal with the pain inside. He couldn't allow the boy's rage to kill his spirit, or his desire for revenge to warp him into something even worse than what Batman became. Without even trying, Dick created a place for himself in Bruce's heart and life. It had been so easy and yet so hard for Bruce...

< Bruce didn't know what he was going to say to the young boy, didn't think he was capable of being emotional support... but he had to do SOMETHING to stop the tears. He moved to the side of the bed and softly said, "Dick?"

The boy jerked upright, wiping his face and trying to look brave. "I'm sorry, Mister Bruce. I just..." He stopped, tears welling in his bright blue eyes again. "I just couldn't help it."

Bruce looked surprised, asking as gently as he could, "You don't think I'm angry at you for crying, do you?"

Dick hesitated and then said, "No... I just thought maybe I woke you up or something."

Bruce smiled faintly, "No, son... I was already awake. I've been... trying to find a way to help you, and I have to admit to being a

little out of my league." He stopped and then continued in a voice softer still, "I remember when my parents were killed, too. I wish that I could take that pain away from you."

Dick scrubbed his face and scooted closer to Bruce, leaning his head trustingly against the large man's arm. "I miss 'em. This place... it's so different from the circus. And I don't know what to do and what not to do, or what I'll get in trouble for," he confided in a tiny voice. "If I mess up, are you gonna kick me out?"

Bruce was startled enough to wrap his arm around the small boy, "No, Dick, I'm not. I don't have any experience at this, so I might do it badly... but I won't kick you out when you mess up. Messing up is a part of learning the right way to do things."

Dick's small shoulders sagged with relief, and he hugged Bruce tightly. The slight tension in Bruce's frame communicated itself, though. As Dick started to draw away, Bruce stopped him by hugging him a little tighter.

"Don't be afraid of anything in this house, Dick. There's *nothing* you can do that would make me kick you out. I want to help you, and I can't do that by kicking you out." Bruce sighed. "I'm sorry that I haven't been available much since you got here. I'll try and rectify that as soon as I can."

Dick shrugged and snuggled his small body against Bruce's. Sleepily, he muttered, "Y'don't have to spend lots of time with me. My parents did, but that's cuz we were a team. We always had to rehearse and stuff."

Bruce was surprised to realize that Dick felt safe enough with him to cuddle up like that and start to fall asleep. Exhaustion had to be a constant companion to the boy's sorrow. He helped Dick climb back under the covers on the bed and murmured quietly, "We're a team, too, pal. You'll see... we just have to learn how. Both of us."

Bruce watched the young boy fall asleep with his hand trustingly in the large man's. This feeling in his chest... what was that? Without even trying, the boy had touched him in ways he'd always feared. His expression inscrutable, Bruce studied the child who had already wormed his way past the stout emotional barriers that Bruce had defended for so many years. He wondered what the hell to do now.

Bruce whispered softly, pushing dark hair off the sleeping boy's brow, "Nothing's going to hurt you again, Dick. And we're going to make that bastard pay for what he did to your parents." Didn't want the boy? Maybe Dick Grayson was exactly what he'd been searching for in his life... someone who would understand.>>

... But it hadn't worked out. He had driven Dick away in the end, too emotionally attached to face the fear of losing him too. He hadn't *wanted* Dick to leave, but seeing him get shot by the Joker had almost stopped Bruce's heart with fear. So he had reacted instinctively to protect himself, and tried to forbid Dick the mantle of Robin. That knee-jerk reaction destroyed their relationship completely. It had lost him Dick, just in a different way. But Bruce could live with that, if Dick was still alive.

Even now, years later, they were still not very close. He did keep tabs on Dick through mutual friends. Barbara and Alfred were his main sources of information about how he was doing. He'd been lonely after Dick was gone, and it was only then that he understood the depth of his own love. He had come to depend on both Dick and Robin. His halting admission of that to Dick met with derision, and their relationship remained on the footing of an armed truce.

Bruce finally nodded to himself. He interfered between them when they were younger, but he sure as hell didn't have the right now. And he didn't want to, really. He wanted them to be happy in their love, he was just concerned about what might happen later. As always. All he could do was the same thing he always did, and that was to watch out for them. They were going to make it, those two, if anyone could. They were too stubborn and their lives too intertwined already for it not to work. And maybe they'd teach him something about how to get past the past... but he doubted it. He reminded himself to send Tim over to the West Side tonight, and then stood to go take care of some Wayne Enterprises business before nightfall. Tonight, he'd swing by Barbara's apartment and see just how well she'd applied what he taught her about security, just in case.

Family Reactions - Chapter 3 Terri Hayes

Alfred returned to the kitchen after the announcement, keeping his feelings under his best butler's face. He was ecstatic, though. Master Dick and Miss Barbara were perfect together, in his not so humble opinion. He clearly remembered the first time he came across them in the library supposedly studying biology...

< "No, really, Babs... I'm just not getting it. I'm not trying to be difficult. Why is mitochondria important?"

Alfred smothered his grin as Miss Barbara's sympathetic voice began to explain, patiently, what mitochondria was and why it was important. He was amazed at the young woman's ability to re-explain things to young Master Dick 5 different ways.... but it also amazed him just how many questions Dick could ask about a topic without repeating one. Obviously that young man knew what he was doing.

A quick peek around the doorframe told Alfred all he needed to know. With their heads bent close together in concentration, he could see clearly why Miss Barbara continued. The methods of flirtation hadn't changed so terribly much from the times when Alfred himself was young.

With a slight grin, quickly smothered, the butler entered the library with hot chocolate and cookies. "Hot chocolate. I thought you might need an interlude to relax some, Master Dick."

Alfred's British intonation sent the two young people scooting away from each other, flushing with embarrassment.

Dick stammered out his thanks, while Barbara cleared her throat and managed to sound almost calm. "That was very thoughtful of you, Alfred, we could use a break."

Leaving the tray on the coffee table, Alfred allowed his affectionate gaze to take in the blushing faces and then he left the library. Stopping just outside the doors, he allowed himself to crack the grin that threatened as he listened.

Dick's soft groan was of mortal humiliation, and Alfred could hear Miss Barbara getting up to pour hot chocolate. She sounded a little confused, but was attempting to keep things on a 'normal' footing. "What's the matter, squirt? I think it was sweet of Alfred."

Taking her cue, Dick's adolescent pride reasserted itself, "Don't call me squirt, four-eyes. And I just didn't want Alfred to actually *see* how badly I'm doing in Biology."

Alfred just shook his head and left them to their friendly bickering, amused at the love/hate kind of flirtation.>>

... Their flirtation had continued on and off for months. They called each other names, but yet they worked together as a cohesive team when they were 'out and about,' as Alfred called their night work. It had been a joy to watch the two shy young people find out that another person would indeed look past what they viewed as terminal faults. Miss Barbara used her intelligence as a shield to keep young men from getting close enough to see the fragile young woman beneath the strong exterior, while Master Dick used his sense of humor as his shield. Their verbal fencing had kept him amused for months.

Alfred remembered when Dick Grayson first came to the Manor. Angry, hurt, confused and wanting revenge in the worst way, the young Master had been quite a handful. The young man confided things to Alfred that he wasn't even sure Dick remembered. Just as fearful of losing loved ones again as Master Bruce was, young Dick had still been willing to try and get close to people...

< Alfred turned from the counter, a knife for chopping celery and onions in his hands. "Not terribly so, young man. Do you need assistance?"

Dick relaxed a little and pulled a stool from the breakfast bar over to the counter, perching himself atop it to watch while the butler resumed chopping vegetables.

"Not... well, sort of." He helped himself to a stalk of celery to munch on while they talked. "How come Bruce is... like that?"

Alfred stopped chopping to look closely at Dick. 'Like that' could mean many things. "Like what, young man?"

Dick shrugged and said, "Like... he has a broomstick up his butt. I dunno." He took a healthy bite of the celery stalk and continued around the mouthful, "He acts like he doesn't really want me here. He's always glarin' at me and stuff."

Alfred sighed softly to himself. Dick sounded miserable, though he was trying to hide it. He chose his words carefully as he resumed dinner preparations.

"Master Bruce is... a quiet man, Master Dick. It isn't that he doesn't want you here, I promise you that. You remind him very much

of himself at your age, I think. And although he couldn't spare you the pain of your parents' death, that doesn't mean he didn't want to."

Alfred's tone sounds thoughtful, "I think, perhaps, your pain brings back his own. That could be why he always seems to be glaring. Not at you, but at the pain that you're going through. He is not one to appreciate feeling helpless, and he knows that's what you feel right now as well."

Dick pondered that carefully and asked with a child's logic, "If he's not mad at me, he shouldn't look like that at me all the time. He's scary when he looks like that."

Alfred chuckled softly, "I will endeavor to mention that he seems to be scowling quite a lot around you, and suggest that he try not to so much, young man."

Dick grimaced, "No, you better not. He'll just get mad that I told you." He eats more of the celery before saying softly, "My mom used to make chicken soup the same way... lots of celery, onions and carrots."

Alfred glanced at the young boy, "I'm sure she was a very good cook, Master Dick." Though not openly demonstrative with his affection, he tried to make him feel secure. "Tell me a little about your parents, young man?"

Dick smiled some and began to relate small things. "My mom always smelled like violets. She had this perfume that she always wore on show nights, it was my Dad's favorite. Lots of nights, we ate at the cafeteria, but sometimes my mom would get in the mood to cook something, and it was real good."

Dick paused, "She was the best, Alfred." His voice sounded choked, "I miss them... so much, all the time."

Alfred's hand reached out to touch the curly dark hair of the youngest of his foundlings. His voice was quiet but bracing, "I know you do, young man. But they are always with you. Every time you remember them in this way, they are near."

Alfred wasn't a man given to fanciful notions, but those words seemed to help Dick's threatening tears. He smiled at the butler, wiping his eyes. "I'm gonna make them proud of me, Alfred. So that whenever they look in on me, they'll smile."

Alfred's smile was small but affectionate on the young boy. "I know they're already proud of you, young man. Now... take your celery with you and go fetch Master Bruce, all right? By the time you both get washed up, dinner will be ready on the table."

As the young boy raced off to do as asked, Alfred made a mental note to speak to Master Bruce regarding Dick's needs. The boy missed his parents, he needed someone with whom to share that. Someone who could understand firsthand. Alfred wasn't certain that Bruce would be up to such a task, but it couldn't hurt to nudge his elder 'son' to help the younger.>>

... Master Bruce had tried, but young Master Dick's emotions were so

out in the open, so easy to read, that it was uncomfortable. Young Master Dick shook Master Bruce's self-imposed emotional exile by being so able to express his feelings. The bond that grew between them wasn't based on Bruce sharing his feelings in quite those ways. He just couldn't talk about the death of his parents with the younger boy.

Though he never mentioned it to Master Bruce, young Master Dick had come to him when Miss Barbara refused to see him anymore. It worried him that they seemed so intense together, and he regretted that it ended so badly although it had not been an unexpected development in Alfred's view. He was privy to the young man's tears and anguish, more than a little surprised at just how far the boy confessed the relationship had gone. As he thought about it, though, it made more sense. While Barbara physically had been a little old for Dick, they had been on each other's intellectual and emotional level. They had also been each other's source of support and partners. Inevitably, that would take its toll. Especially when it ended...

< "Milk and cookies, young man?"

The tradition had been established between Alfred and Dick when the child first came to the mansion, and though he was much older now, it remained a part of their lives. Perhaps because those talks over milk and cookies, or various other snacks, had forged a deep bond of trust between the two men. Nothing that was said ever went past Alfred, and that was important to the young Master.

A faint smile crossed Dick's face, though it was painfully obvious to Alfred what effort that smile truly was. Although he didn't answer, Dick took a seat on one of the stools by the breakfast bar. Taking that as his cue, Alfred moved about the kitchen to gather the required elements for a long talk. Joining Dick at the breakfast bar with a large plate of cookies and two glasses full of milk, the butler studied the young man's face. What could have occurred between the two this time, to put that look of anguish in the boy's eyes?

The answer to that wouldn't be long in coming, though. Dick's voice had been strained as he played with his milk glass and said quietly, "She won't see me anymore. I don't understand what I did wrong."

Alfred nodded, enlightenment dawning. Compassionately, he asked, "I see. Did she say why?" He thought perhaps it was a girl at school that young Master Dick had begun 'dating' recently.

Dick's face twisted into a scowl, his pain hidden inside the anger. "She *said* that it just wasn't working out. That we were too far apart in age, that we didn't have anything in common, that I needed to find someone my own age. Where does she get off??"

The tirade stopped as the pain took over, "How could she, after all that we've been to each other, Alfred? What did I do wrong? I... I love her."

Alfred's gaze rested on Dick's face, "I can't explain her actions, young man. I can only listen and be here for you."

Dick took the unique opportunity afforded him by Alfred's compassion

and affection, sobbing as he hadn't since the day he'd grieved for his parents' death in the same way... in the same place.

Genuinely surprised at the confessions that came from young Master Dick that night, the butler learned things he wasn't certain he wanted to know. It was Miss Barbara that the young man was so intimately attached to. Their relationship had been much more than a years-old crush.

When Dick finally calmed some, they talked long into the afternoon. The young man was subdued throughout the discussion, and that worried Alfred.

"I just don't get it, Alfred. How can she be so casual about something that was so ... profound? It wasn't just sex." Dick had blushed as he said it, but stood by the words. "It was like... the connecting of two souls. I can't be the only one who felt it. How can she just walk away from something so powerful, and so right?"

Sighing softly, Alfred tried to respond in the best way he could. Surrogate fatherhood was much more difficult with Dick than it had been with Bruce, in some ways. The young Master was so much more emotional than Master Bruce. That was a good thing... and sometimes a bad thing.

"Perhaps, young man, what you felt was something that she couldn't understand... or was afraid of. You are both in a very intense line of night work, and to be so close to someone else can sometimes be a danger. I cannot answer for her, only she can tell you why. If she chooses not to, then you may have to move on with your life. If it was meant to be, it will work itself out in the end.">>

... It had been cold comfort to the boy though, Alfred remembered. When young Robin had begun taking such radical chances on the nocturnal adventures in Gotham, Alfred fretted in his silent, private way that the boy would be badly injured in his exploits. Master Bruce hadn't asked him if he knew what was happening, and Alfred felt that young Master Dick's privacy was more important than any details of his relationship. It was enough that Master Bruce knew there was a problem. He was quite observant, and Alfred believed that Master Bruce must have had some indication of what was going on between his young charges. Young Master Dick's anger had caused him to push constantly...

< "If you ever pull a stunt like that again, Robin, you will no longer do this job."

"Don't threaten me, Bruce. I might take you up on it, and then you'll have no one to blame but yourself!"

"This discussion is far from over. You endangered not only yourself tonight, but the police and the hostages as well. Smashing through that window was reckless at best, suicide at worst. Are you *trying* to get yourself killed?"

Dick's response was to strip off his cape and stalk toward the small anteroom where the uniforms were kept. When he came back out, his voice was cold. "It was a chance that had to be taken, and you weren't going to do it. So I did. Deal with it."

Bruce's sigh as Dick stomped up the stairs was tired. He stripped off the cowl and cape, looking toward Alfred, who had remained silent through the whole 'discussion.' "He put himself in front of two machine gun-toting maniacs tonight. He just doesn't care if they blow him away, and it's making him a danger to himself, and a danger to others. And I can't get through to him."

Alfred looked upward after Dick was gone and then back to his 'elder son.' "His heart is breaking, Master Bruce. I'm concerned that he is trying to prove something, but the young lady doesn't appear to be interested."

Bruce's smile was grim, "Oh, she was interested, Alfred. But she should have known better than to get involved with someone so young. Dick hasn't even had a chance to know what else is out there. And if it comforts him at all," he nodded toward where Dick vanished. "She's out there doing equally stupid things. Chasing them down separately to save them from themselves is keeping me from catching some of the crooks... but I can't let them get themselves killed over a crush gone sour."

Bruce turned to leave, saying regretfully, "Keep an eye on him, Alfred. I can't get through to him.">>

... Alfred had gotten the distinct impression that Bruce knew a LOT more than he was saying. It disturbed him to think that Master Bruce might have had something to do with that intolerable situation. He watched as Bruce ran himself ragged trying to keep the two younger crime-fighters from getting themselves or someone else killed.

Alfred shook his head, remembering the next weeks of craziness. Every time he turned around, Robin had been doing SOMETHING insane. He had ached for the boy's heart, and with long talks, eventually things had calmed. But Dick hadn't been the same... he'd closed off his heart, burying the pain deep.

Of course, he didn't think Master Dick had been old enough for True Love, as it were... but then again, who can truly say that love is age specific? It had certainly left a raw wound on the young man's soul that didn't heal until just recently. Whatever part Master Bruce might have played in that breakup, Alfred hoped that he would be all right with it now. Young Master Dick and Miss Barbara had been through so much, both together and apart, that they deserved some happiness.

As his hands prepared hot coffee and sandwiches for Bruce Wayne's dinner, Alfred's thoughts turned to comparing the two young men that he considered himself to have raised. Admittedly, with no experience at all with children, he probably had not done a very good job with Master Bruce. By the time Young Master Dick had come, Alfred understood what mistakes he'd made... but each young man was so different, that helped his ability to parent them as well...

< As the two walked back toward Wayne Manor, Bruce asked in a solemn voice, "Will I be allowed to stay here, Alfred? Or will someone come and take me away?"

Alfred's voice was soothing, "Your parents, young man, asked me many

years ago when you were born if I would act as guardian for you if something should ever happen to them. Provisions have been made, and you'll remain here at home."

Bruce simply nodded. He had come through the funeral and burial in a kind of shock. Though he was at least speaking now, Alfred was concerned that the young boy would never again be the carefree child who laughed with his parents...>>

... His fears had been justified. Master Bruce had been so traumatized, so overwhelmed by his grief, that Alfred hadn't known what to do except simply be there for the boy. Perhaps if he had found some way through the intense isolation Bruce felt, he wouldn't be such a driven man. Perhaps, though, it still would have happened.

With Dick, the child had been used to being able to be open about his feelings... and when he found Alfred to be a willing listener, he'd taken advantage of that in a way that Bruce simply hadn't as a child. Even Dick was a driven individual, though, and Alfred believed their intense need to see justice done would have manifested in other ways even had the Batman not come into existence.

Alfred placed the sandwiches on a tray along with the carafe of coffee, shaking his head. He was a surrogate father to Master Bruce and he loved that boy like his very own. He had done the best he could with little experience at raising children. His only regret was that Master Bruce could not seem to find it within himself to allow someone close enough to help assuage the pain. Even with the bumps in the road, the closeness of Master Dick and Miss Barbara's relationship healed many of the breaches in young Dick's soul, and Alfred wished as he walked back toward the secret stairwell to the BatCave that Master Bruce could have let some young woman be the same thing to his heart.

As the aging butler stepped back into the Cave, his eyes rested on the elder of his two 'sons.' Dressed in all but the cape and cowl of the Batman, Bruce Wayne was an imposing sight.

Alfred placed the tray on the console of one of the large computers and said in his imperturbable fashion, "Dinner, Master Bruce. Do eat before you go out there, young man. We cannot have your stomach growling when you are attempting to be silent." Alfred's gaze seemed calm, cool and collected but visible to those who knew him well, as Bruce did, Alfred's affection was plain. The faint smile that followed the butler's order contained the same reserved showing of affection back as Bruce responded to the command.

Tim Drake, AKA the new Robin, swung exultantly across the space between two buildings with an almost silent whoosh of air. This was the life, as far as he was concerned. He was an important member of the team known as the Dynamic Duo. He was a man of honor, defending the innocent from crime and injury. He grinned beneath his mask as his feet landed atop the building just across the road from Barbara Gordon's apartment. He knew better than to land ON her building. Barbara, known in crime-fighting circles nowadays as Oracle, had the whole place wired.

Robin pulled a small communications unit from his belt, signalling Barbara's apartment. Oracle's amused voice responded immediately with, "He's on his way, Robin."

"He's already arrived."

Robin whirled about at the sound of the low, familiar voice of Nightwing. Both older brother and mentor, the elder (ex)Robin viewed the younger with a grin. "You should be more careful," Nightwing stated. "I could have been anyone."

Tim scoffed, "Anyone? Not likely, with me standing here just across the road from her place." He closed the com unit, sliding it casually back into his belt. "So what's up, Nightwing?"

Nightwing's amusement grew. It wasn't so long ago that he'd chatted with the new Boy Wonder about Barbara. The kid hadn't believed a word he said when he denied any emotional attachment to her. It was no wonder. Did **everyone** see what he hid from even himself? First the Huntress mentioned it, then Tim... well, anyway.

"What's up is that I thought you ought to be one of the first to hear my news, and I wanted to tell you myself." Nightwing smirked, "You deserve the chance to crow about it, since it won't happen often."

"What news?" Robin's eyes peered closely at Nightwing's face. Good news, bad news? Obviously good, the man was grinning like a loon.

"I'm getting married."

Tim was speechless. Dick was **what*??* Getting married, but.... "But.. but..." Sputtering incoherently, the Boy Wonder just stared.

Nightwing laughed softly, watching Tim stammer. He simply waited quietly for either a barrage of questions or for enlightenment to spread over the kid's features.

"But.. but... who...!?" At that, Tim stopped, knowledge dawning. "Ohmygod, you're marryin' Babs! Oh my GOD!" He started laughing. His next words were definitely made in a tone of 'I told you so,' "And here you denied every bit of what I said."

Nightwing rolled his eyes, grinning. "What can I say, short stuff? You saw something that I didn't want to see." He shrugged nonchalantly, "It won't happen often, so enjoy it."

Robin chuckled, "That's great! You guys have fun." His grin eased to a smile of true happiness, "I think you're perfect for each other... don't let anything stop you from being happy." Perhaps too serious for him, more serious and adult an attitude than Dick had ever seen from the kid.

'Something's changed with him,' Dick thought to himself. Aloud, he simply said, "Thanks."

Robin glanced over his shoulder, toward the sky. A bright BatSignal

lit up the sky. He turned his eyes back to Nightwing and smiled, "That's my cue.... you gonna join?"

Nightwing paused briefly, and then nodded, "Yeah. Yeah, I will." He pulled a communicator unit from his own belt and contacted Oracle.

A rueful smile graced his love's face as soon as she saw him, "Yeah, yeah, I know... I saw the signal. Get going. Tell Robin I said hi, and call if you need me."

Nightwing grinned, "I'll be back later, babe. I love you."

Shaking his head at the exchange, Robin waited until the com unit was secured safely and launched his grappling hook. "You two are gonna be enough to make a guy get cavities."

The laughter that floated on the night air was soft, as the two flew across town to the source of the call.

End
file.